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THE MESSAGE OF JESUS TO OUR MODERN LIFE

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AN OUTLINE BIBLE-STUDY COURSE OF THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus is either Lord of today's life, or he is outgrown. It is the business of the Christian church to show that he is still the Master of life, the Revealer of God; to make him real and supreme to the modern world is the all-inclusive task of Christianity. We have had innumerable theological discussions concerning his nature and his person, but too often they have led men into an attitude of mere intellectual assent. Jesus must touch the will, must stir the courage, must bring comfort, assurance, trust, if he is really to help mankind. Until we do take him seriously as a determining factor in our modern life, we shall be far enough from realizing the full power of the gospel.

The new interest in Jesus' teaching is the outgrowth of a loyalty to him which is deeper than that of theological assent. We have come to see that if we are to be Christian we must be Christlike. But to be Christlike we wish to know how Jesus lived; what was his attitude toward the various interests of the life in which we find ourselves concerned; what were the principles which governed his intercourse with his fellows; what were his teachings; also what was his method of application of general principles to specific needs. In other words, we want to understand him through the study of what he actually said and did.

Such a desire is bringing the world increasingly to study his teachings. We believe that we can find in them the principles of eternal life. The

intelligent Christian does not wish to copy the details of Jesus' life. In fact that would be quite impossible for the men who live in our modern world. But we do believe that there is need of applying his principles more completely to our day, not only that we may have a vision of truth, but also a larger sense of the presence of God in human life; a deeper experience of the spiritual forces in the midst of which we live; a greater readiness to sacrifice in the interests of those ideals to which we formally assent, but which we find it so difficult to pursue.

In the following studies the effort is to be made, first of all to understand Jesus' teachings, and then to discover what bearing they may have upon our modern world. The difference between our civilization and that in which Jesus lived is too marked to require discussion, but it has the same need of moral ideals and spiritual inspiration. If Jesus is to be a creative force in the world today his teaching must actually control human life and action. He must be followed by us both as individuals and in our collective activities. Christianity is not abstract but concrete. We have to be Christians as citizens, as factors in the economic world, as husbands, wives, and children. We should study Jesus' life from this concrete point of view. We must distinguish between general principles and the application he makes to the particular conditions of life as he knew it in Palestine, but his messages to the modern world are to be found in both the principles and the methods of their application. To this end we need to study his words historically and biographically. The impression which they will make upon our lives will be very largely in proportion to the sense of reality which comes to us from the proper method of study. We need to use our imaginations, as well as our logical powers. We need to study prayerfully, as well as critically. We need constantly to test our loyalty, as well as our understanding.

PART I. THE PRINCIPLES OF JESUS

STUDY I

THE TEACHING OF JESUS ABOUT GOD

All the teachings of Jesus rest upon his knowledge of God. If he could be conceived of as being mistaken in his teachings as to the Heavenly Father, all his other teachings fall to the ground. His morality and his gospel, both alike, rest upon his theology. It would be a mistake to think of Jesus as a philosopher like Aristotle, because he did not speculate about God; he experienced and taught God. Therefore it is necessary to begin any study of his teachings at the point

at which he himself began. Otherwise it might be that we should think the gospel was a mere phase of morality or sociology, and that Jesus was essentially a humanitarian. The gospel is really a message about the saving power of God, and Jesus' ethical and social teachings are no less religious than those with which he sets forth the possibilities and obligations of what we ordinarily call the religious life.

I. IDEAS CONCERNING GOD WHICH JESUS INHERITED FROM THE HEBREW PEOPLE

Jesus was a Jew and inherited a noble religion. He was born under the Law. He had been trained as a child, as all Jewish children are trained, in the elements of the Old Testament religion. He preached to Jews who had the same religious inheritance as himself. Because of this he had no reason to argue for the existence of God, but simply to set forth his conception of God. But this teaching of Jesus cannot be fully appreciated until it is placed in comparison with the ideas about God which Jesus inherited and which he either restated in clearer terms or condemned.

First and second day.—§ 1. *A covenant-making God:* Gen. 6:9-9:19; 17; Exod. 6:1-9; 19. Read Gen. 6:9 to 9:19, especially 9:1-19, and note how the story of the flood culminates in the record of the covenant with Noah, its sign, the rainbow. Read also Gen. chap. 17 and note how God enters into a covenant with Abraham. See still further, Exod. 6:1-9; 19, in which a covenant is made with Moses and the people. Consider how strong in these early days was the idea of a *covenant-making God*.

Third day.—§ 2. *A protecting God for Israel:* I Sam. 8:4-9; 12:1-15, Isa. 11:11-12:6; Ps. 47; 48:1, 2. Read the references in Samuel and Isaiah, and note the idea of *God as father of the nation Israel* in a political sense, a Protector of great power and glory, but observe also that he is not commonly described as manifesting the fatherly element of affection for the individual. See also, Ps. 47; 48:1, 2.

Fourth day.—§ 3. *A fatherly God to Israel:* Hos. 1:10; 11:1-11; 14:4-8; Ps. 68:5; 103:13; Prov. 3:12. Note in Hos. 1:10; 11:1-11; 14:4-8, that a higher ideal is reached in the representation of God as loving his chosen nation as a *father* his child. Consider also the suggestion of his love for individuals. Ps. 68:5; 103:13; Prov. 3:12.

Fifth day.—§ 4. *A lawgiving God:* Exod. 20; II Kings 22:1-23:25. The Old Testament writers represent the law as originating with God (Exod. 20), and in the successive national crises the conception of God as a *lawgiver* comes more and more into prominence. Read the reference in Kings.

II. VIEWS OF GOD WHICH JESUS OPPOSED

This conception of God as lawgiver was greatly developed by the scribes, especially those of the Pharisees. Though the scribes held that the giving of the law was an expression of God's love, they overemphasized the legalistic conception of religion. Naturally the Pharisees endeavored to apply the law as far

as possible. The more law one knew, it was argued, the more likely was one to do right. The attitude which Jesus took toward Pharisaism was largely determined by their teaching concerning God as a severe lawgiver. The grandeur of that conception is evident to all readers of the Old Testament, and Jesus' criticisms must not be understood as directed against the teaching of the Old Testament law, but rather against the overdeveloped opinions of the Pharisees. It was also in large measure due to his opposition to the Pharisaic conception of God that Jesus so distinctly continued the spiritual conception of God set forth in the prophets. God was to be trusted as more than a lawgiver sternly insisting on the keeping of highly specialized statutes. He was a father.

Sixth day.—§ 5. *God as a severe moral taskmaster:* Matt. 23:23; Luke 18:12; Mark 7:3, 4; Luke 13:10-17; Mark 3:1-6; John 9:13-16. How far this slavery to law was carried may be seen in such passages as Matt. 23:23; Luke 18:12; Mark 7:3, 4. How rigorously the law was enforced in the matter of Sabbath observance may be seen in the unwillingness of the Pharisees to have cures performed on that day, except when necessary to preserve life (Luke 13:10-17; Mark 3:1-6; John 9:13-16).

Seventh day.—§ 6. *God a regarder of the letter rather than the spirit:* Mark 7:5-13; Luke 11:46; Matt. 23:13-26. How far this conception of God as lawgiver might become actually fatal to moral life may be seen from such passages as Mark 7:5-13. By a process of casuistry the duty to care for one's parents was destroyed by using a command to keep one's vows be they never so foolish. See also Luke 11:46; Matt. 23:13-26. Notice particularly that it was these aspects of legalism that stirred the indignation of Jesus.

Eighth day.—§ 7. *A God who insisted upon ceremonial:* Matt. 5:21-22, 27, 28, 33-35, 38, 39, 43, 44; Matt. 9:10-17; Mark 2:16. In ethical matters this opposition of Jesus can be seen in the foregoing passages. For his opposition to the ceremonial of Pharisaism see Matt. 9:10-17; Mark 2:16.

Ninth day.—§ 8. *That Jesus was not opposed to the Law, but to Pharisaical interpretation of it:* Matt. 5:17-20; 23:1-3; Mark 12:35-37 (Luke 20:41-44). At the same time it is to be remembered that Jesus' opposition to the legalistic conception of religion is not one of indiscriminate denunciation. Notice particularly his fundamental conception of his work as one of completing, not of destroying, the past (Matt. 5:17-20). The distinction drawn by him between Pharisaism and that law of which it was an extreme development may be noticed especially in Matt. 5:20 and 23:1-3. His criticism of the Pharisaic teaching concerning the Messiah is well worth considering in this relation. Mark 12:35-37 (Luke 20:41-44).

[This study will be completed in October]